

SESSION 2004 UPDATE

6TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

Rep. Brad Benson

EDUCATION REPORT

Creating Opportunities for our Children

Dear Friends,

The 2004 legislative session is now underway. My priority is to create opportunities for Spokane – both educational opportunities and job opportunities. This newsletter highlights a few of the major issues facing the Legislature this session and outlines my goals to improve public education and ensure every education dollar we spend directly benefits our kids.

This newsletter will provide you with information on these issues as well as important contact information so you may reach me in Olympia. Remember, your input helps me represent our district.

If you have questions or concerns about the issues I am working on, please give me a call, or write me. I'm always glad to hear from you and welcome your thoughts and ideas.

I'm honored to serve as part of your 6th District legislative team and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Brad Benson
State Representative



■ **Brad Benson**
State Representative

412 John L. O'Brien Building
P.O. Box 40600

benson_br@leg.wa.gov

TDD for hearing impaired:
1-800-635-9993

**[http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/
members/benson.htm](http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/members/benson.htm)**

Mark your calendar!

Town Hall Meeting

Date: February 21
Time: 10 am-12 pm
Place: Northwest Museum
of Arts & Culture -
Auditorium
2316 West 1st Ave.
Spokane

Toll-free Legislative Hotline: 1-800-562-6000

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.

-Nelson Mandela

Education is the heart of the American Dream.

We support education because we want the best for our children. I believe every penny spent on education must contribute to the goal of ensuring top-notch education for every child. We know that a good education equals opportunity for the future.

Improving the WASL

Education reform began in Washington in 1993. In two years the 10th grade WASL standards for math, reading, and writing will become a graduation requirement. Science standards will be added soon. Today's eighth grade students, including my son, will have to pass the 10th grade WASL to graduate from high school. An alarming percentage of 10th graders failed to pass the 2003 WASL.

My challenge is to improve the WASL without abandoning standards.

One option is to give students who fail additional teaching and allow multiple retakes of the test. I support this option. It is only fair to give kids options to study and pass the test. The biggest argument against retakes is the state will reward failure by sending more money to districts whose students fail; however, these schools can develop strategies that will help students in all schools.

Another option would be to make the WASL an endorsement rather than a graduation requirement. The standards students achieve will be on their diploma as endorsements. This is a less costly option at a time when the state doesn't have a lot of extra money to spend. Opponents argue WASL standards are grade level standards. We require students to meet the 10th grade standards to graduate high school. The endorsement option would eliminate that requirement.

HB 2195, which would make many of the improvements needed to make the WASL a more effective tool, passed the House with my support. It is now being considered in the Senate.

Special Education

School districts are allowed to have a certain percentage of their students classified as special education. For each special education student the district receives a fixed amount above normal per-student funds. The current formula, however, doesn't take into consideration the fact that some districts have more special education students than others. Nor does the current formula consider the individual needs of those children.

Each special education student is required to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) detailing the services the child will receive. Some children have very little need for extra services or attention while others need full-time aides. The flat fee method means a district can "make money" on a low need special-ed student but spends significantly more to support a child with higher needs.

Ultimately we need a system that's fair. The Legislature needs to fully support the needs of our special education children while also guarding against a system that is vulnerable to abuse. I support a system that categorizes the level of need and funds school districts based on those categories of need rather than a flat fee.



Providing students and parents educational choices

As a legislator, my job is similar to a purchasing officer in a corporation. I use your taxpayer dollars to purchase services for people in the state. It's important to me to "buy" the best service at the best price for the taxpayers.

I'm always open to ways to provide children the best possible education at the best price. An option being discussed this session is opportunity schools. This is a new model of public charter school that may provide more flexibility to operate mission-driven schools in exchange for increased accountability.

Ultimately my responsibility is to students and taxpayers. It is my duty to consider education alternatives while also trying to support and improve our public schools.

KEEPING EDUCATION DECISIONS LOCAL

Over the years the state has passed one rule after another, requiring subjects be taught at public schools. Since the school days aren't getting longer, these requirements squeeze available teaching time for academics. While each new requirement is well-meaning and seems reasonable, as a group the requirements become onerous.

While some of us may not agree with every decision a school board makes, I fully support local control. It's easier and more appropriate for citizens to work with local school boards than to change state or federal law.

Higher Education

The state needs to prepare for growth in higher education enrollment. By 2008, K-12 public school enrollment will have peaked and the "Baby Boom Echo" children will move into higher education.

It has always been my goal to make more certificate and degree programs available in Spokane. We've made a lot of progress toward that goal. Last year we funded a new Health Science building at Spokane community colleges and funded the first phase of the new nursing school at WSU Spokane. We're still building our downtown campus district to house and administer new programs.

Washington colleges are funded with "slots" for full time equivalent students. As the college age population grows, it is vital the state respond by funding needed slots at Spokane Community Colleges, Eastern Washington University and Washington State University. It's also important to include Gonzaga and Whitworth as important resources as we plan for the future.

Here's a look at some of the other issues I'm working on: Providing relief from skyrocketing insurance rates

Many think of tort reform in terms of the medical industry. And it's no wonder: escalating medical malpractice premiums are forcing health care providers to close their doors. Family doctors have stopped delivering babies. But the same holds true for virtually every industry. Contractors can't build homes because of lack of insurance. Non-profits are choosing to stop providing services. Employers everywhere are struggling to pay skyrocketing premiums to protect themselves against lawsuits. Liability premiums paid by doctors, clinics, and hospitals are a major cost driver for health care premiums and copays.

Because this problem is affecting so many people, there is rising public support for sensible liability reform that puts limits on non-economic damages.

At some point, unrealistic awards in lawsuits create more harm than good. We're at that point in Washington. I'm working to develop reasonable tort reform that can help keep doctors and businesses working, and lower our health insurance premiums.

Cracking down on drunk-drivers

There are a number of bills being offered this year to further crack down on drunk driving. One bill is my felony DUI bill. The bill allows prosecutors to charge habitual drunk drivers with a felony. Police and prosecutors tell me they see the same drunk drivers repeatedly and they are severely limited in their ability to get them off the roads until they injure or kill someone. This bill would help prosecutors get intoxicated drivers off the road.

I've also introduced a bill to allow drivers with occupational licenses to drive to and from substance abuse treatment. Drivers who have had their licenses suspended can apply for a license to get to and from work, but can't drive to their required treatment.

Hopefully, the two bills together will discourage drunk driving while enabling people to seek help.

Holding the Line on Spending

Last year we were facing a \$2.7 billion budget deficit. While the budget we passed wasn't perfect for anyone, we managed to create a balanced budget that didn't rely on general tax increases like those passed in Oregon and Idaho. We are now working on the first of two yearly supplemental budgets.

Our budget reserve is down to \$500 million. While that may sound like a lot, it needs to be put in context. If we make no policy changes this year and fund only growth in entitlement programs (which are not optional), our reserve will be cut in half with one year to go in our two-year budget cycle. If this year follows the trend, we'll enter next year's budget discussions with no reserve and a projected deficit in the next budget cycle.



While I expect to support a few policy changes that will spend some of that reserve, we must be careful not to let our desire to fund programs drive us into a large deficit.

The best way to restore our reserves is to create jobs and allow our economy to rebound. A vibrant economy generates revenue. When our budget is "back on its feet", we will be better able to fund needed services without increasing taxes.



Rep. Benson and Page Daniel Repsold.

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State Representative
Brad Benson
P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

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